
L A N D U S E
A N D Z O N I N G



Introduction

The North Cambridge neighborhood consists of a mixture of residential, commercial and industrial uses. Historically most of the industrial area was concentrated in the westernmost part of the neighborhood (Alewife), separated physically from the residential sector by the Alewife Brook Parkway. Today, most of this land is either office or open space. All of the residential area of North Cambridge is concentrated in the area east of the Parkway. Industrial and commercial uses east of the Parkway tend to be clustered on and around Massachusetts Avenue and the railroad tracks. Parks and playgrounds are integrated throughout the neighborhood.

This chapter examines the major land use and zoning characteristics of North Cambridge and highlights the changes that have occurred since 1975. In addition, the chapter presents an assessment of the development potential in the commercial and industrial areas, highlights neighborhood opinions of a variety of land use issues and recommends specific strategies for controlling and managing future growth in North Cambridge.

General Land Uses

The North Cambridge neighborhood contains a variety of land uses: residential (38%), commercial (31%), open space (18%), institutional/governmental (7%), industrial (4%), parking (1%) and vacant (1%). (See Land Use Map on page 35.)

Since 1975, a number of land use changes have occurred in the neighborhood primarily in the conversion of industrial land for commercial uses.

- Commercial uses have increased by 111 acres, or 23 percent, while industrial uses have decreased correspondingly by 106 acres, or 22 percent. Most of these changes occurred in the Alewife Triangle area where approximately 60 acres of industrial land have been converted into commercial uses. Another 20 acres of industrial land at the W. R. Grace site/Jerry's Pond are presently under development for commercial use as Alewife Center.
- Seven acres of industrial land were converted to institutional land at the Alewife MBTA station.
- Four and a half acres of industrial land along the B & M railroad tracks were converted to open space as Linear Park. Additional open space was created at Massachusetts Avenue and Clarendon Avenue when an industrial parcel was converted to Clarendon Park.
- Residential uses have increased by two percent. Many vacant lots along Massachusetts Avenue and in the Cogswell Avenue area have been developed into residential uses. Several institutional uses have also been converted into residential uses.
- Most of the residential interior of North Cambridge has remained unchanged.

North Cambridge General Land Use Changes, 1975 - 1987

Use	1975		1987		Change in Acres	Change In Percent
	No. of Acres	Percent	No. of Acres	Percent		
Commercial	38	8%	149	31%	+111	+23%
Residential	173	36%	182	38%	+ 9	+ 2%
Institutional/ Governmental	24	5%	34	7%	+ 10	+ 2%
Industrial	125	26%	19	4%	-106	-22%
Open Space ⁽¹⁾	48	10%	86	18%	+ 38	+ 8%
Parking ⁽¹⁾	72	15%	5	1%	- 62	-13%
Vacant ⁽¹⁾			5	1%		
Total	480	100%	480	100%		

⁽¹⁾ The 1975 land use information does not provide definitions for the various categories. Discrepancies in open space, parking, and vacant land uses between 1975 and 1987 are therefore partially due to calculational differences.

Source: 1975 North Cambridge Profile,
Cambridge Community Development Department
1987 Current Measurements

Zoning

North Cambridge has 12 different zoning districts each with its own height, density and use restrictions. (See Map on page 39 and Table on page 37.)

- In general, the inner core of the neighborhood is zoned Residence B, one of the City's most restrictive zoning districts.
- The Massachusetts Avenue corridor contains four different zones allowing for a mix of residential and commercial uses as well as differing densities. (See Massachusetts Avenue Chapter.)
- Industrial land east of Alewife Brook Parkway is confined to areas along the southern periphery of the neighborhood (B&M railroad tracks) and the land currently owned by W.R. Grace (including the planned Alewife Center development) adjacent to the Parkway.

- West of the Alewife Brook Parkway, the Alewife area within North Cambridge includes an open space zone (the MDC reservation) and two office zones. (See Alewife Chapter.)

In 1978, most of the neighborhood, east of the Alewife Brook Parkway, was downzoned significantly from a variety of commercial and industrial districts to a Residence B zone. Two different industrial districts composed of four separate land areas were retained, although they were also downzoned substantially.

- The 20 acre W. R. Grace/Alewife Center site was rezoned from an Industry B district - the most permissive zoning in the City - to an Industry C district which is a substantially more restrictive zoning district.
- Three separate parcels along the B&M railroad tracks (Linear Park) and Rindge Avenue were rezoned from Industry A and Industry B districts to a more restrictive Industry A district.

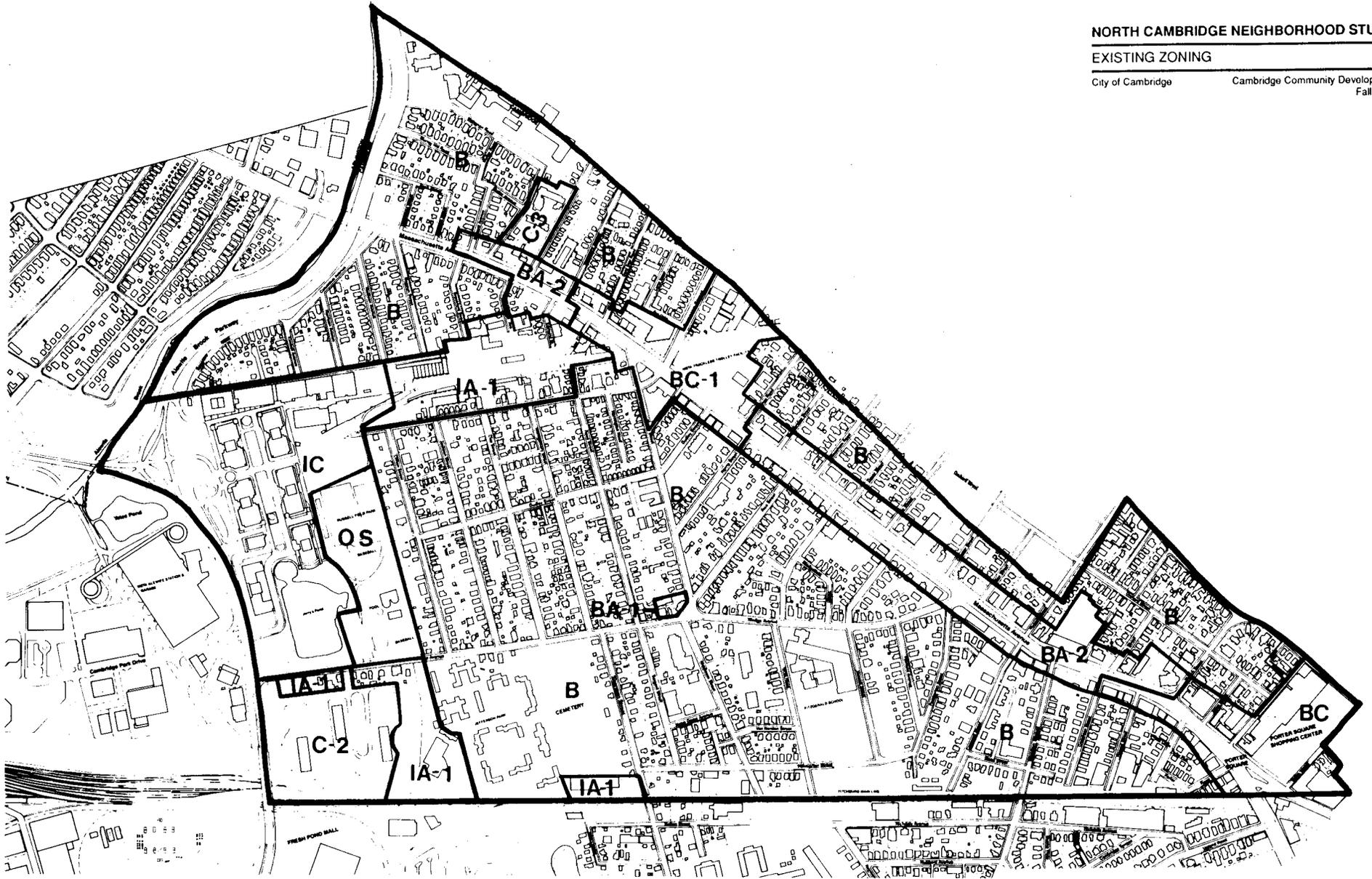
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EXISTING ZONING

City of Cambridge

Cambridge Community Development

Fall 1990



In addition the first open space zoning district in the neighborhood was created at Russell Field by rezoning a multi-family residential and an industrial zone.

Two years later, in 1980, the entire Alewife area west of Alewife Brook Parkway was downzoned

significantly. Prior to this rezoning, the majority of the land had been industrially zoned with the least restrictive (Industry A and B) zoning districts. Now, however, the area contains a mix of residential, commercial, industrial and open space districts with stricter zoning controls.

North Cambridge Zoning Districts - 1988

Zone	Use	Min. Lot Area/ Dwelling Units	Max. Dwelling Units Per Acre	FAR	Max. Height
B	Residential	2500 s.f.	17	.5	35'
C2	Residential	600 s.f.	72	1.75	85'
C3	Residential	300 s.f.	145	3.0	None
BC	Commercial	500 s.f.	87	2.0	55' ⁽¹⁾
	Residential			2.0	55' ⁽¹⁾
BC-1	Commercial	300 s.f.	142	2.75	60' ⁽²⁾
	Residential			2.5	60' ⁽²⁾
				(with special permit: 3.0)	
BA-1	Commercial	1200 s.f.	36	1.0	35'
	Residential			.75	35'
BA-2	Commercial	600 s.f.	72	1.0	45' ⁽³⁾
	Residential			1.75	45' ⁽³⁾
O2	Commercial	600 s.f.	72	2.0	85'
	Residential			2.0	85'
O3	Commercial	300 s.f.	145	3.0	None
	Residential			3.0	None
IA-1	Commercial	1200 s.f.	36	1.25	45'
	Industrial			1.25	45'
	Residential			1.25	45'
IC	Commercial	300 d.u. on the site		1.0	45'
	Industrial			1.0	45'
	Residential			1.0	45'
	(PUD/IC—5 acre minimum:			2.0	85')
PUD-5	Commercial	600 d.u. on the site		2.2	125'
	Residential			2.2	125'
OS	Open Space				

⁽¹⁾ 35 feet within 50 feet of a residential district

⁽²⁾ 50 feet average

⁽³⁾ 35 feet to the cornice line

The last major rezoning in North Cambridge occurred in 1986, when Massachusetts Avenue underwent a comprehensive rezoning. The underlying theme of this rezoning effort was to create two nodes on the Avenue by concentrating development in Porter Square and Trolley Square, and to encourage low scale development on the linear sections of the corridor leading to and from these nodes. (See the Massachusetts Avenue Chapter.)

Development Potential

The residential areas in North Cambridge are unlikely to change significantly because most of the existing development is already built out to the current Residence B zoning limitations. However, it is likely that the majority of the non-residential areas will change in use or be developed more intensively in the next five to ten years.

The remaining Industry A-1 districts have substantial development potential:

- There are four sites along Linear Park: Fawcett Oil, the greenhouses, Cambridge Lumber, and Belanger Roofing that have the potential of almost a quarter million square feet of new development. Under a single development package, these parcels could yield 183 units of housing.
- One parcel along the railroad tracks, just north of Bellis Circle, could have the potential of 30,000 square feet of new development, or a total of 38 units of housing.
- Several parcels along Rindge Avenue are too small to allow for much additional new development, if developed individually. One site, however, between the Fresh Pond Apartments and Jefferson Park, has the potential for an additional 164,000 square feet of new construction, or 126 units of housing.
- Several parcels in the Industry C district (W.R. Grace property) are currently developed considerably below their potential. The three properties closest to Harvey Street have

combined potential of an additional 248,000 square feet of new development. If they were to be redeveloped residentially, 412 units could be built on these sites.

Neighborhood Survey Results

In addition to the demographic and community opinion information presented in the previous two chapters, residents were also asked specific questions about development issues in North Cambridge. The highlights of these responses are as follows:

(1) Many more residents than not think that development in the Alewife area has had a positive effect on the neighborhood. The responses were even more positive when asked about the effect of Alewife development on the City as a whole.

- When asked how they felt about the impact of development in the Alewife area on their neighborhood over the past five years, 40 percent said it has had a positive effect, 21 percent thought it has had a negative effect, and 24 percent said development has had no effect.
- 52 percent said Alewife development has been positive for the City as a whole, 15 percent said it has been negative, and 17 percent said it has had no effect on the City.

(2) Thirty-one percent of North Cambridge residents think that development pressures cause major problems for the neighborhood. Nineteen percent think they cause minor problems, and 21 percent do not think that development pressures cause any problems for the neighborhood.

(3) When asked about the positive effects of development, residents most often cited improved public transportation (30%), improved economic conditions (16%), and upgraded physical quality (15%). Also mentioned were improved/new buildings (12%) and improved quality of life (11%).

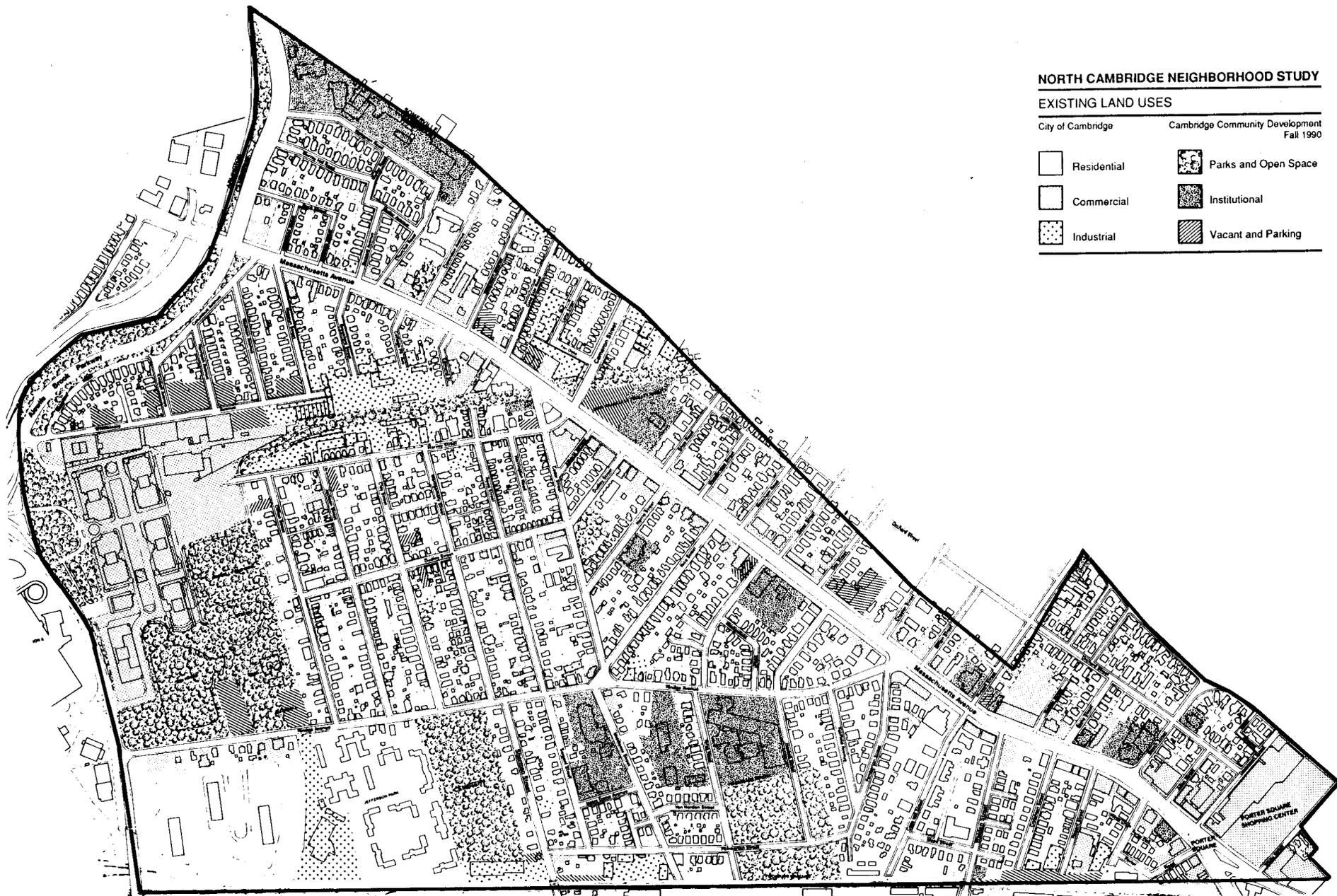
(4) When asked about the negative effects of development, residents overwhelmingly cited traffic and parking problems (43%). Following this

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	Residential		Parks and Open Space
	Commercial		Institutional
	Industrial		Vacant and Parking



issue, residents listed overcrowded conditions (16%), high housing costs (14%), and declining environmental quality (14%).

Study Committee Concerns

(1) **Inappropriate Zoning:** Committee members think that the Industry C zoning district, and the three Industry A-1 zoning districts, are incompatible with the surrounding residential areas. They raised the following concerns:

- Individually, the amount of development potential that is permitted in each of these four zones is too great. When taken together, the combined development potential in the Industry C (Whittemore Avenue), the Industry A-1 (Linear Park), and the Business C-1 (Trolley Square) districts would result in substantial overdevelopment of the neighborhood.
- Although the Committee thinks that the amount of residential density allowed in these districts is too much, members wish to ensure that future zoning will maintain incentives to build housing. In addition, the Committee would like to see residential units built which are also affordable. Members are well aware that these issues will require trade-offs; rezoning efforts should carefully study options.
- Traffic on Rindge Avenue, Massachusetts Avenue, and Harvey Street has been increasing steadily. The amount of increased density permitted in these zones would make the traffic congestion unmanageable. Therefore, future zoning should attempt to balance residential and commercial uses at a level which will not exacerbate this problem.
- The Committee would like to see Rindge Avenue strengthened as a retail area which serves nearby residents. In addition, members are concerned about the type and amount of potential development which could occur on the parcels of land between Jefferson Park and Fresh Pond Apartments. Finally, they

would like to see Rindge Avenue upgraded physically: better maintenance of the bus area, more trees and landscaping on the street, and more attention to the storefronts.

(2) **Sheridan Square:** Although this area is referred to as a “Square”, the area lacks an identity, as well as any sense of cohesiveness. Traffic patterns are chaotic and hazardous, and for this reason, parking can sometimes be dangerous. In addition to these concerns, the Committee noted that commercial establishments in the Square have a difficult time sustaining their businesses. Historically, this area has served as a neighborhood retail district, and members would like to see the area revitalized so that it could continue to serve the surrounding neighborhood with a convenient place in which to shop.

Land Use Recommendations

(1) **Rezone the Industry C and Industry A-1 districts to make them more compatible with the surrounding residential areas:**

- Arrange a dialogue between area residents and property owners to see if an appropriate rezoning package could be negotiated.
- Study carefully the relationship between density, economic viability and traffic generation.
- Encourage an appropriate balance of residential and commercial uses.
- Investigate all options to maximize affordable housing opportunities.
- Create an urban design plan for the parcels of land on Rindge Avenue. Involve the residents of Jefferson Park and Fresh Pond Apartments in formulating this plan.
- Continue to restrict access from Harvey Street, if the remaining sites in the Industry C zone are developed commercially as part of Alewife Center.

(2) **Examine ways to create a viable neighborhood retail district in Sheridan Square.** Explore

available programs or funding sources to assist property owners and small businesses to upgrade their buildings.

(3) Explore the feasibility of various roadway and other improvements such as creating an island with grass and trees, to Sheridan Square. These improvements would make the area safer by creating better defined traffic patterns and would help give the Square a better sense of identity.

The Development Process

One of the most important aspects of this study was the process by which City officials and neighborhood residents worked together to formulate the recommendations for future action. During the study, a considerable amount of time was devoted to questions regarding the land use and development decision making process. Study Committee members used this opportunity to express their concerns over past actions and to articulate those areas in which they wanted stronger responses from the City. In addition, the Study Committee members pressed for a greater neighborhood role in the decision making process.

To address these issues, staff of the Community Development Department worked closely with the Study Committee to better understand their concerns. Several meetings were held on the development process alone. By the end of these meetings, both Committee members and Community Development Department staff felt that significant gains had been made. Committee members had a better understanding of the constraints and rationales for various land use policies, and the Department had a better understanding of neighborhood concerns regarding these policies. As a result of this, a closer and better working relationship has been established which will improve the decision making process in the future.

Study Committee Concerns

(1) Clarification of the Land-Use Process:

The Committee raised many concerns regarding the decision making process in Cambridge. While many discussions were held on this subject, the following questions highlight the various issues:

- What are the different roles, responsibilities, powers and limitations of the Planning Board, the Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA), the Community Development Department and the Inspectional Services Department?
- What is the relationship between these various Boards and the City departments which staff them?
- How do the Planning Board, the BZA and the Rent Control Board interact with each other when more than one has jurisdiction over a particular development?
- What is the role of the Community Development Department? For example, is the Department supposed to mediate between the interests of different groups or advocate for the interests of one group over another?
- What is the role of the Neighborhood Planning component within the Community Development Department? How does this component interact with other components in the Department?
- How do the Community Development Department, the BZA and the Planning Board interpret "neighborhood participation"? When and how do they utilize this input when making decisions? When a developer is sent to the community for feedback on their projects, what kind of feedback does the Department/boards look for? What kind of feedback will they listen to?

(2) **The Business C-1 Special Permit Process:** Residents are becoming increasingly frustrated with the way in which the special permit review process works. In Trolley Square, the aesthetic value in construction and design, as well

as the community's stated concern for open space, are not addressed adequately in the current zoning. The Committee questions whether the current special permit criteria in Trolley Square are consistent with the objectives of the neighborhood residents. In most cases, the members believe that the public amenities achieved through the special permit process are not worth the increased density allowed by the permit. Because most people in the neighborhood tend to oppose most of the special permits and the Planning Board grants them, it often appears as if the community and the Planning Board are on opposite sides of most issues.

Development Process Recommendations

(1) The City should develop a procedure to improve the coordination of the review of proposed development projects with all appropriate City agencies, such as the Community Development Department, Inspectional Services Department, Traffic Department, License Commission, Conservation Commission and Rent Control Board. As part of this process, the following methods should be considered:

- Study the possibility of timing permit review processes, whenever legally possible, so that they occur sequentially.
- Initiate a process whereby a City department or board, upon receiving a building, demolition, or special permit application, or a variance request, would notify all other boards and departments with jurisdiction over the project.
- Recommend a process to ensure that the notification of these applications and of all public hearing notices will be mailed to the Neighborhood Planning component and to the North Cambridge Stabilization Committee Chairperson. These notices should be written in clear language, understandable to the general public.

- Improve communications between the Board of Zoning Appeals and Planning Board through an ongoing dialogue concerning zoning, planning and necessary ordinance changes.

(3) The Community Development Department will work with neighborhood groups to improve communication between the Department and the community and to clarify what the City considers to be "valid community input." The Department could achieve this through the following:

- Increase outreach and educational efforts to help residents better understand the development process, the roles of different groups involved in the process, as well as their powers and jurisdictional limitations. These efforts could include:
 - 1) writing and distributing fliers and pamphlets which explain different facets of the development process; and
 - 2) inviting City officials to attend Stabilization Committee meetings to make presentations and answer questions on a variety of development related issues.
- Try to ensure that all hearing notices mailed to residents are written in clear, understandable language and include more information about the proposed development, special permit or variance application, or other request.
- Establish procedures to ensure that the neighborhood planners work closely with other Department staff on all projects.
- Communicate its viewpoints on various projects as early as possible and keep the public informed of any changes in the project or the Department's positions.
- Listen to the community's concerns over particular projects or issues and either:
 - 1) work with the Planning Board or the developers to help them take those concerns into account; or

2) clearly articulate the reasons why the Department disagrees with the neighborhood.

- Work closely with the neighborhood to help residents understand exactly the legal jurisdiction of the Planning Board and what issues they may or may not consider regarding a particular project. If, in an individual project, many residents continue to have concerns which cannot be addressed legally by the Planning Board, especially under the special permit criteria, the Community Development Department will provide assistance to the neighborhood to address those concerns.
- Involve the community at an early stage in the development of new policy recommendations.

(4) In cases where the neighborhood has continual problems with specific land use policies, the Community Development Department will work with the neighborhood to examine the relevant issues and determine whether recommendations should be made to change these policies. For example, the Community Development will work with the neighborhood to:

- look at the special permit criteria to see if they could be revised and improved to better address the community's concerns.
- develop a mandatory design review process for all developments over a certain size.
- develop a process whereby traffic mitigation measures would be required of all projects over a certain size.